ASU Law student turns trauma into an opportunity to serve

Miss Arizona Victoria Vredevoogd transformed her experience with sexual assault and the justice system into a mission to support survivors

By Dolores Tropiano, ASU News
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Story highlights

ASU Law student Victoria Vredevoogd is a sexual assault survivor who turned her experience into a mission to support others.

Vredevoogd founded the Gender Violence Project at ASU to connect survivors with legal resources, promote accountability and educate the community.

Her advocacy earned national recognition at Miss America, and she plans to continue helping survivors as a pro bono attorney.

At 25, Victoria Vredevoogd has already had experiences few people ever will.

She was named Miss Chandler 2026 and then subsequently crowned as Miss Arizona 2026. She is a classically trained vocalist and the author of the fantasy romance novel “A Legend of Golden Shadows.”

And, Vredevoogd is a survivor of sexual assault — an experience that would ultimately change the course of her life when she said the justice system ultimately didn't follow through with the case.

“In that moment,” she said, “I told myself, ‘Well, no one’s going to fight for me. I guess I’ll just fight for myself.’”

Two months after that, she took the LSAT.

Now, three years later, Vredevoogd is a third-year student at Arizona State University’s Sandra Day O’Connor College of Law and the founder and president of the Gender Violence Project, a coalition of ASU Law students dedicated to preventing gender-based violence and supporting survivors.

Her advocacy helped establish May 29 as Arizona’s first Gender-Based Violence Awareness Day, and as part of Domestic Violence Awareness Month this October, the Gender Violence Project will host its annual Domestic Violence Awareness Month panel on Oct. 28.

The public event brings together prosecutors, investigators and victim advocates who work with domestic violence survivors to demystify the legal process and give attendees an opportunity to ask questions about reporting abuse, prosecuting cases and supporting survivors.

Finding a purpose and a plan

Vredevoogd grew up in Chander, Arizona, and started competing in beauty pageants at the age of 12.

In 2022, she earned a marketing degree from Grand Canyon University but still had no particular plan for her life.

Then, she was assaulted by a stranger.

Vredevoogd reported the assault and spent eight hours at a police station. She said she cooperated with the investigation and provided extensive evidence. The person she identified as her assailant was arrested, but Vredevoogd later learned through a voicemail that the case had been dismissed.

Vredevoogd said neither the detectives nor the officials she contacted could adequately explain the decision.

Nearly half of women in the United States have experienced sexual violence involving physical contact during their lifetimes, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“Gender-based violence is one of the most under-criminalized crimes in our nation,” she said.

But Vredevoogd did not let the decision deter her.

“I feel like, if anything, it gave me a purpose to go and make the change and be the advocate that I wish I had for myself at that time,” she said.

The experience also contributed to her being accepted at ASU Law. She pitched administrators on an organization unlike anything then available at the school.

“I told (them) I could create something that this law school has never had before, and something that could impact generations, even long after I graduate,” Vredevoogd said.

The result was the Gender Violence Project, which she describes as Arizona’s first student-led coalition of its kind and the third in the nation, following organizations at Harvard University and the University of Michigan.

From assault to advocacy

The term gender violence serves as an umbrella that includes sexual assault, domestic violence, stalking, harassment and human trafficking. Vredevoogd said she wanted the Gender Violence Project to address all of those issues because more than one had affected her life; in addition to surviving sexual assault, Vredevoogd also lost an aunt and a cousin to domestic violence-related homicide.

“I wanted to make sure that their story was still heard,” she said.

The organization focuses on three areas:

Support: Connect survivors with resources and legal information and help them make informed decisions about reporting and legal options.

Advocate: Promote greater accountability and access to justice.

Educate: Advance education and prevention on campus and in the community.

Through a partnership with the Maricopa County Bar Association, the Gender Violence Project connects survivors of domestic and sexual violence with attorneys who can provide free consultations. It also offers self-defense courses, legal-literacy panels and other resources.

In one case, a domestic violence survivor contacted the organization for help. The project connected her with an attorney who represented her for free in a custody dispute, Vredevoogd said.

“She was able to get both her and her children safe,” she said. “That was through the work that we do with the GVP. That’s one of our success stories.”

The group also looks for ways to support survivors beyond the legal system. At a “Crafts for a Cause” event, students made jewelry and birthday cards for trafficking survivors at Where Hope Lives, an Arizona-based human trafficking recovery center.

For Vredevoogd, the work fills gaps she encountered after her own assault.

“I didn’t know how to report a case,” she said. “I just kind of called the police and hoped for the best. I didn’t have the opportunity to do a free legal consultation for a civil case. I didn’t have the money for it, so I never did anything civilly.”

She also lacked a community of people who understood what she was experiencing.

“I went through my whole case alone,” she said. “Nobody even knew about it until I decided to go to law school.”

Using the crown as a platform

Vredevoogd’s advocacy became her community service initiative when she ran for Miss Arizona and the focus of her presentation at Miss America this year.

Miss America contestants compete in talent, fitness, onstage questions, panel interviews and evening gown. Each contestant also promotes a community service initiative.

Vredevoogd, who performed opera for the talent portion of the competition, used the national platform to speak about the Gender Violence Project. Her work earned her recognition through Miss America’s Quality of Life Scholarship program, which honors contestants for community service.

Vredevoogd is on track to become the first lawyer in her family. After graduating, she plans to become a litigator and continue working with the Gender Violence Project — this time as one of the pro bono attorneys helping survivors.

“We’re really here to bring awareness to survivors of domestic and sexual violence, to give them a space to share their story when they’re so often silenced, and to give them help where they need it,” she said. “That’s why it matters — so people don’t feel so alone.”

Resources for victims of sexual violence

> ASU's Sexual Violence Awareness, Prevention and Response website provides links to a variety of reporting options, resources and educational programs to prevent sexual misconduct. Learn more about the resources and reporting options by reviewing a summary of the resources or the more extensive Sexual Assault Misconduct Guide.
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> The National Sexual Assault Hotline provides referrals for long-term mental health support, local sexual assault services, and legal or medical needs: 800-656-HOPE.

This story originally appeared on ASU News.

Main image



Victoria Vredevoogd is a third-year law student at the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law and the founder and president of the Gender Violence Project. She was photographed at the O’Connor Law Library on Thursday, Oct. 15. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News